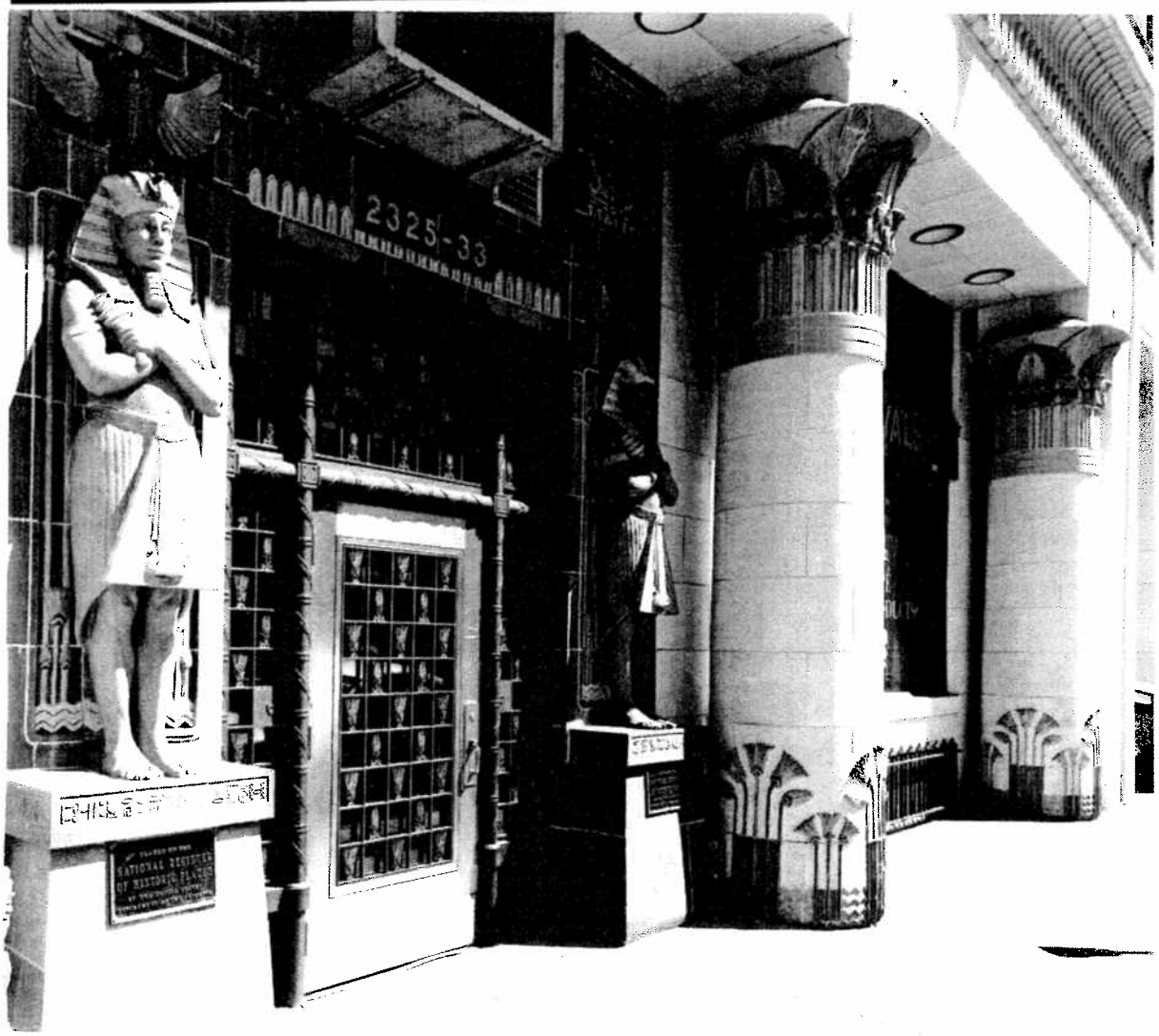
LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



Reebie Storage Warehouse

2325-33 N. Clark St.

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on June 3, 1998

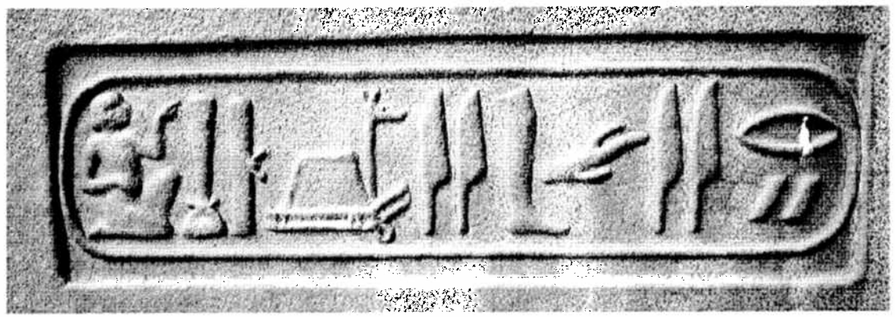
CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

ABOVE: The building as it appears in a 1910s postcard.

COVER: Twin "pharaohs" at the building's main entrance.

BELOW: According to experts, the Egyptian hieroglyphics—read from right to left—on the side of the pedestals for the twin pharaohs actually spell out "REEBIE BROTHERS."



The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council following a detailed designation process. It begins with staff report on the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark. The next step is a vote by the Landmarks Commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. Not only does this preliminary vote initiate the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until the final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

Please note that this landmark designation report is subject to possible revision during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to City Council should be regarded as final.

Reebie Storage Warehouse

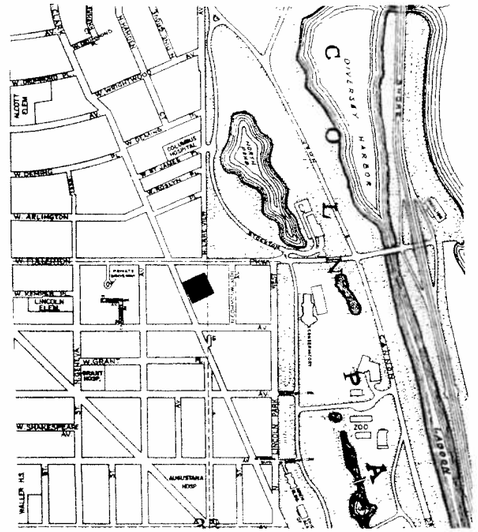
2325-33 N. Clark St.

Built: 1921-22
Architect: George Kingsley
Facade Design: Fritz Albert, sculptor
Northwestern Terra Cotta Co.

Most Chicagoans know the Reebie Storage Warehouse. Standing on a heavily traveled section of North Clark Street, its face covered in gleaming white terra cotta and exuberantly colorful Egyptian-style ornament, the Reebie is as memorable as it is whimsical. Those who pass it become curious. What was it used for originally? Why Egyptian?

The answers reveal important elements in Chicago's development and demonstrate the way that the Reebie Warehouse captures the architectural and cultural spirit of the early 1920s when it was planned and built. The story of this building also brings together some of the most interesting Chicagoans of the day: the scholar James Henry Breasted, the well-traveled businessman John Reebie and his hardworking brother William, the sculptor Fritz Albert, and the promotion-minded architect George S. Kingsley.

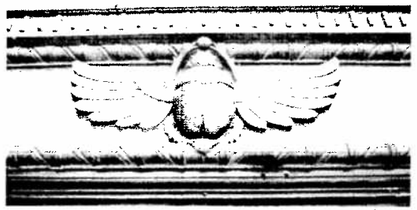
The Reebie is one of the country's finest examples of the "Academic Egyptian Revival" style, according to architectural history professor Alan Gowans. "They were trying to get it right in the 1920s," says Gowans. "Right" in the sense that the Egyptian iconography is as accurate and informed as the sculptor who designed the Reebie's ornament could make it. While there are Egyptian Revival buildings and funerary monuments in Chicago, there is nothing comparable to the Reebie Building. It stands alone in the quality of its terra-cotta ornament, as well as in the accuracy and completeness of architectural expression of the Egyptian theme.



The Reebie Storage Warehouse is located on North Clark Street, one-half block south of Fullerton and two blocks west of Lincoln Park.

Even in the brief time it takes to pass the Reebie in a car or on the Clark Street bus, the Egyptian imagery is apparent to every rider who looks. Two figures stand on hieroglyphic-inscribed pedestals on either side of the entry; their arms are crossed over their chests and they wear the headdresses of the pharaohs. Beetle scarabs are mounted on the wall near the pharaohs' heads. Columns bear the Egyptian lotus symbol; at the base is a blue stylized motif representing water. Above, there is a concave-shaped cornice with another scarab with a yellow orb in the center.

The colors are bright; aside from yellow and blue there is green and orange. Indeed, if anything seems to compromise recognition, it is the color. Those who know ancient Egyptian monuments through travel or photography know them to be earthen red. The Reebie seems almost garish by contrast. Yet the Reebie's colors are correct, if not slightly muted, in comparison to ancient Egyptian architecture and sculpture which has only lost color over the 4,000–5,000 years some of it has existed. So we come to one of the most startling facts about the Reebie Building. All of its ornament is based directly on ancient models. It is, in other words, a serious attempt to bring ancient Egyptian iconography into 1922 Chicago.



Beetle scarabs (top) are found thoughout the building, including above the heads of the pharaohs flanking the entrance to the Reebie Storage Warehouse. *Above:* columns bear the Egyptian lotus symbol.

W.C. Reebie & Brother Company

According to company records, William Reebie (1859-1921) founded the company in 1880. At 12, William had dropped out of school and gone to work to help support his parents and eight siblings. His parents were German immigrants who had arrived in 1868. Bill, as he was called, had become an experienced hauler by the time he was 20. He moved coal and pianos principally and had become so strong that, according to one story, he was able to lift the back end of a 1,400-lb. fire truck out of the mud when the horses pulling it could not budge it. Bill began his company with a helper and a two-handled cart. Most of his clients lived in walk-ups and Bill and his worker carried pianos up the flights of two-, three- and four-story buildings. The company

By the time this c. 1890 photograph was taken, the headquarters of W.C. Reebie & Bro. included a series of buildings in the 2500-block of North Sheffield Avenue. Building billboards called Reebie the "largest van company in the world."

expanded and Bill was joined by his brother John. The 1885 street directory was the first listing for the W. C. Reebie & Brother express company, then located at 2533 N. Sheffield Avenue.

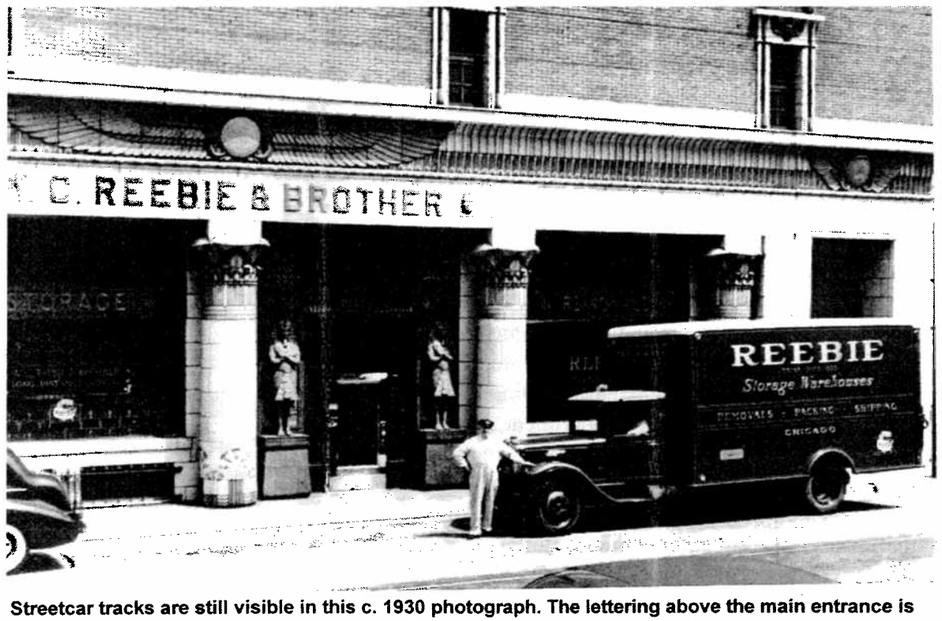
Until the turn of the century, it remained a moving company. Indeed, William Reebie is said to have been the first in the city to have a moving van, which he had to build himself and then named "The Moving King." And moving was still difficult at that time. A moving job from the city to the north suburbs took at least two days because many of the roads were not yet paved.

Around 1900, increasing mobility among families and individuals (even young, unmarried women were leasing apartments and living alone), along with the development of apartment towers and apartment hotels, created a need for storage warehouses. People would store the furniture and personal belongings that did not fit into smaller apartments. Among other common storage uses, people would store their furs in the summer and their cars in the winter.

Throughout the 1910s, competition among storage companies was on the rise. Reebie expanded its business with the construction of warehouses at 4549 and 5035 N. Broadway, and in 1916 opened an auction business at its Sheffield Avenue location for the sale of stored items that were no longer wanted. By 1921, the Reebie company was ready to expand to a new location.

The Reebie and the Roaring Twenties

During the 1920s, dramatic changes in lifestyle, as well as the real estate development in Chicago, were taking place that would influence the building of the Reebie Warehouse on North Clark Street. Like the rest of America, Chicago was in a celebratory mood in the 1920s. The horrors of World War I were past and Americans had returned triumphant. These were the Roaring Twenties. Moral scruples were relaxed, and divorce was no longer unheard of. The country was thriving economically. The middle class could afford to travel abroad and they did, going to Europe, Egypt, Greece and beyond, often on tours



Streetcar tracks are still visible in this c. 1930 photograph. The lettering above the main entrance is believed to have been removed around the time of the company's sale in 1974.

organized by companies like Cook's. Appetites for such adventures were often whetted by lectures—a common form of entertainment in those pre-television days—given at social clubs by scholars, explorers and others.

The appearance of Chicago also was changing greatly in the 1920s. In 1922, the Michigan Avenue Bridge was finished, a public works project that transformed the northeastern portion of the downtown. The bridge opened North Michigan Avenue and the lakeshore to concentrated development which led, in turn, to new and elegant shopping and residential areas. A new building type, the apartment tower, began to spring up on the north side. Advertisements promoting apartment buildings and apartment hotels proclaimed a new way of living, requiring new thinking about decorating, furniture and even entertaining. Cunning items like hideaway beds were created to minimize the space for necessary domestic objects.

When the Reebie Storage Warehouse was built in the early 1920s, it would have been no less arresting to passers-by than it is today. Clark Street was a lively street then, as it is now, with a mix of commercial and residential buildings, but none so unconventional as the Reebie. Two- and three-story buildings with ground-level stores and flats above —with great bay windows to scoop light into deep apartments—faced Clark. West of Clark street, the smaller side streets were solidly residential. As if to illustrate the changing times, four blocks from the Reebie, a garage with capacity for 60 cars stood next door to a blacksmith who still shoed horses.

Into the mosaic of the 1920s, the Reebie Storage Warehouse fits as precisely as a colored stone. The building was completed in 1922 when competition in the storage business had become intense. Other storage facilities were being constructed in the same period and few of them were completely utilitarian. Architecture was a way to distinguish one's company from the others, and the buildings were often featured in storage company advertisements. William and John Reebie wanted this, their sixth storage building and their planned headquarters, to attract attention. They wanted to imprint the image of their company

REEBIE
SINCE 1880
STORAGE & MOVING CO.

For decades, company stationery and moving boxes have featured the head of an Egyptian sphinx (top). Above: Reebie movers at work outside of the London Guarantee Building on North Michigan Avenue, circa 1940.

on the minds of potential clients like the residents of those new North-Side high-rise apartments who had more possessions than their new dwellings could accommodate. Although revival styles were in vogue when the Reebie was built, classical themes like the Greek or Italian Renaissance were customary choices, not Egyptian.

Chicago was the center of Egyptology in the early-20th century, largely due to the work of University of Chicago professor James Henry Breasted, shown here with his wife and son on an expedition to Egypt in 1906.

The Lure of Egypt

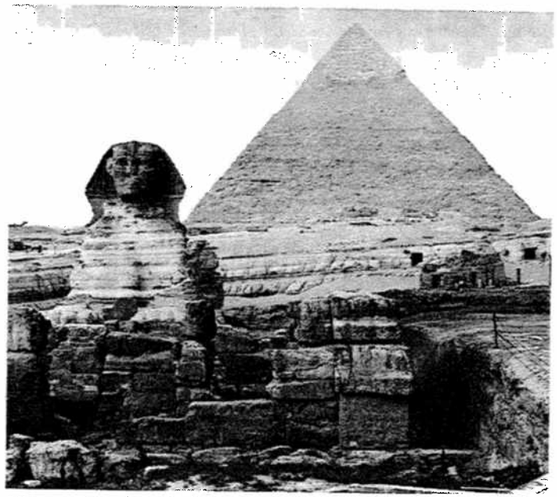
Ancient Egypt was, however, on the minds of Chicagoans at the time. James Henry Breasted (1865-1935), the country's most esteemed Egyptologist and a man of great charisma, was given the first professorship in Egyptology in the United States when he received his appointment at the University of Chicago in 1894. His prominence made Chicago a center for Egyptology in the early part of the century, when great strides were being made in professional archaeology. His specialty was hieroglyphics; he was the first to puzzle out the Rosetta Stone's hieroglyphics which were inscribed in a kind of reverse order that had baffled others for years.

Despite the esteem in which he was held, Breasted, like most professors of the day, was paid a miserly salary. To supplement his income, he began to offer engaging and accessible lectures all over Chicago and throughout the East Coast. He became, "a great popularizer of Egyptology," says John Larson, chief archivist of the Oriental Institute —which Breasted founded in 1919—at the University of Chicago.

In 1916 Breasted published *Ancient Times*, which became the standard text for generations of high school students and yet was sophisticated and lively enough to attract adult readers too. Former president Theodore Roosevelt reviewed the book enthusiastically for *The Outlook.*

On his archaeological expeditions to Egypt, Breasted negotiated and procured antiquities for the core collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum and the Oriental Institute. These pieces were soon placed on display, where they became popular exhibits.

Breasted and the city's cultural institutions certainly stimulated interest in ancient Egypt in their



The modern fascination with Egypt dates to the early-19th century, following Napoleon's invasion. Since then, it has been a popular travel destination for Americans, including John Reebie, a partner in the Reebie Brothers Storage and Moving Company.

time, but they did not introduce the topic. Egypt had been a source of fascination in the United States for some time. Isolated since the 16th century when the Ottoman Empire seized control of it and cut off trade routes through it, Egypt had been virtually forgotten while the Turks ruled it.

The world regained its memory only when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, bringing with him more than 100 scholars whose research resulted in the 19-volume *Description de l'Egypte* published between 1809-1822. It is indeed a description of Egypt, including everything about the place, from minerals, to bugs and fishes, to architecture, art, antiquities and more. Extraordinary as it is to imagine now, scholars of the day did not know the ancient monuments of Egypt existed. The French volumes —which became available to subscribers in the United States as they were published over such an extended time—sustained and fed, morsel by morsel, the appetite for knowledge of Egypt, and in turn, the architectural style that became known as the Egyptian Revival.

The combined impact of visiting Egypt and seeing the warehouse in California persuaded John Reebie to select an Egyptian theme for his new Chicago headquarters.

The Innocents Abroad

When he wasn't mocking his fellow tourists, Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), described the awe which overcame Americans traveling in Egypt.

> [Egypt] the land which was the mother of civilization, which taught Greece her letters . . . that built temples which mock at destroying time and smile grimly upon our lauded little prodigies of architecture; that old land that knew all which we know, perchance, and more; that walked in the broad highway of civilization in the gray dawn of creation, ages and ages before we were born; that left the impress of exalted, cultivated Mind upon the eternal front of the sphinx to confound all scoffers who, when all other proofs had passed away, might seek to persuade the world that imperial Egypt, in the days of her high renown, had groped in darkness.

Sometime before the Reebie building was designed in 1921, John Reebie traveled in Egypt; the design of the warehouse is testament to the impact of his trip. According to Arthur Reebie, William's son who led the company after the elder Reebies, his uncle John chose the Egyptian motif over the more conventional neoclassical style that Arthur had preferred. (William Reebie died in 1921, and did not take part in planning the new building.)

John Reebie would not be dissuaded from his choice. He had visited the ancient monuments of Egypt, but had also seen an Egyptian Revival storage building in Stockton, California, the Dawson Storage Warehouse (1918; Glenn Allen, architect). The Dawson building is still standing although, as the architectural historian Alan Gowans says, "It is nowhere near as magnificent as the Reebie."

The combined impact of visiting Egypt and seeing the warehouse in Stockton persuaded John Reebie that an Egyptian theme would provide the memorable image appropriate to his new headquarters building. One suspects there something more in it for him, something personal; otherwise, authenticity would not have been as important to him as it plainly was. In a 1970 interview, Arthur Reebie —then 81—said the drawings for the building's

The inspiration for the Egyptian-style design of the Reebie Warehouse is partly due to the Dawson Storage Warehouse in Stockton, Calif. (1918), which John Reebie visited.

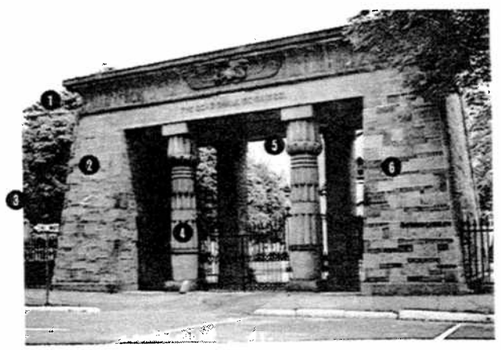
ornament were reviewed for accuracy at the Field Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

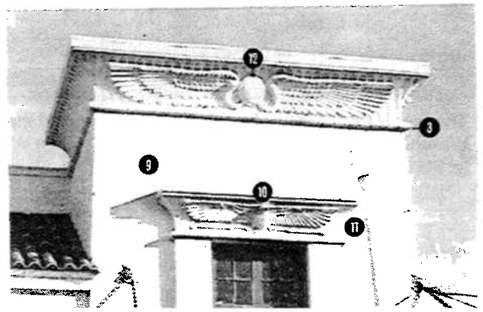
The Reebie building was also costly, yet John was willing to pay. City records show the building cost $600,000 to construct, with $20,000 spent on the ornament alone. These were fabulous sums for the time, particularly when the utilitarian nature of the construction is taken into account. This was, after all, a *warehouse*, with few flourishes behind the gorgeously ornamented facade and lobby.

Egyptian Revival Architecture

Egyptian Revival buildings began to appear in the United States in the mid-1830s, two decades after the publication of the first of the Egyptian studies stemming from Napoleon's expedition. These early examples sought to emulate the monumentality and permanence for which ancient Egyptian architecture was known. Most of the American structures in the Egyptian style were prisons, monuments, cemetery gates, churches and mausoleums.

These somewhat "naive" Egyptian Revival buildings were characterized by a family of picturesque features like: the concave "Cavetto"

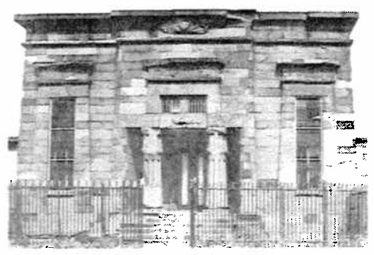




EGYPTIAN REVIVAL ARCHITECTURE
1830-1850, 1920-1930

1. Cavetto cornice
2. Battered walls
3. Roll or rope-like molding
4. Bundled shaft
5. Lotus flower capital
6. Random-ashlar finish
7. Pylon tower
8. Sphinx
9. Smooth ashlar finish
10. Raven
11. Cavetto cornice window head
12. Vulture and sun disk symbol

The above excerpt from *Identifying American Architecture* explains the common elements of Egyptian Revival style buildings, including: the Grove Street Cemetery Entrance, New Haven, Conn. (top left); Ada Theater, Boise, Ida. (detail and overview, top right and above); Richmond, Va. Medical College (below); and Moyamensing Prison, Philadelphia, Pa. (bottom).



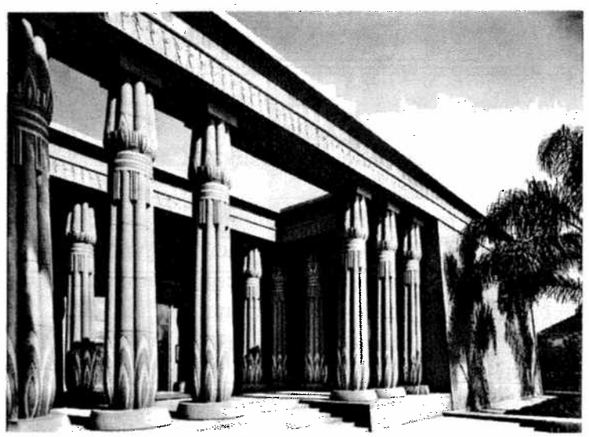
cornice, battered (inwardly sloping) walls, rolled or ropelike molding, the lotus-flower capital, a bundled shaft or column resembling clustered reeds, and the pylon tower. Images of the sun disk and the sphinx were often incorporated.

What makes the architectural design of these buildings naive is that their architects used the Egyptian iconography without comprehending a true sense of its meaning. Instead, the designers of these early Egyptian Revival-style buildings selected various historical elements to give the buildings an overall "picturesque" appearance, rather than recreate the elements in a historically accurate fashion.

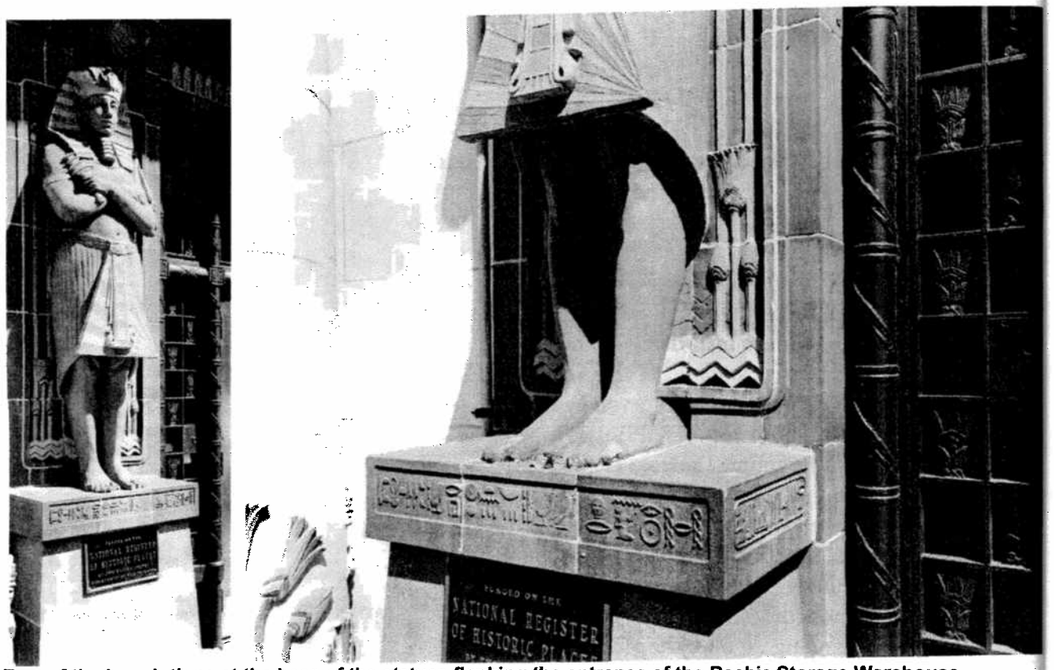
For instance, a number of these building were erected to look as though they had stood for ages: they were built to look like ruins. Marvelous as many of these early Egyptian Revival buildings are, they are very different from the Reebie Building in sensibility, motivation, and appearance.

The Reebie, on the other hand, is best characterized as Academic Egyptian Revival. According to Professor Gowans, academic revival styles—including not only Egyptian Revival but Gothic, Colonial, Classical, Georgian, and others—redefined architectural aesthetics from the 1890s through the 1930s. "Academic" does not refer to a style itself, but how the style is handled. Revival styles were used throughout the 19th century, but at the turn of the century, architects began to refine and correct their use of these historical styles in order to use them in a more historically authentic manner. Other important examples of the Academic Egyptian Revival style include the Dawson Warehouse (see p. 9); Ada Theater (1926-27) in Boise, Idaho, and Grauman's Egyptian Theater (1922) in Hollywood, California.

What elevates the Reebie to one of the greatest Academic Egyptian Revival buildings in the country is the accuracy of its iconography and the exquisiteness of its execution. The two pharaoh figures standing on opposite sides of the entry represent the Reebie brothers. Although the belts at their waists say Ramses II, the names William and John are written in the hieroglyphic equivalent of phonetic spelling at the base of the statues. Two other



The Egyptian Museum in San Jose, Calif., which, like the Reebie Storage Warehouse, is an example of 20th-century, Academic Egyptian Revival-style architecture.

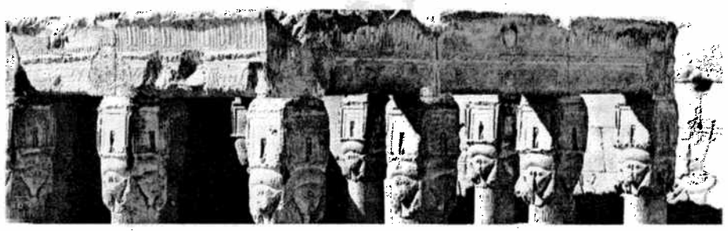


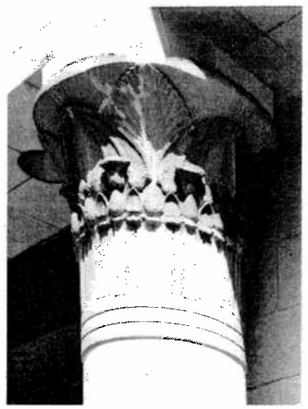
Two of the inscriptions at the base of the statues flanking the entrance of the Reebie Storage Warehouse read: "I have put protection upon your furniture and all sealed things" and "I have guarded all your property every day warding off devouring flames, likewise robbery."

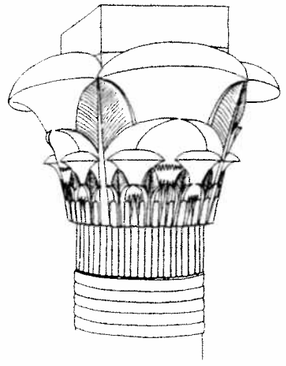
inscriptions read: "I have put protection upon your furniture and all sealed things" and "I have guarded all your property every day warding off devouring flames, likewise robbery." These hieroglyphics were composed by an amateur and contain some errors in syntax, but they are understandable to Robert K. Ritner, Ph.D., an associate professor of Egyptology at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, who recently translated them.

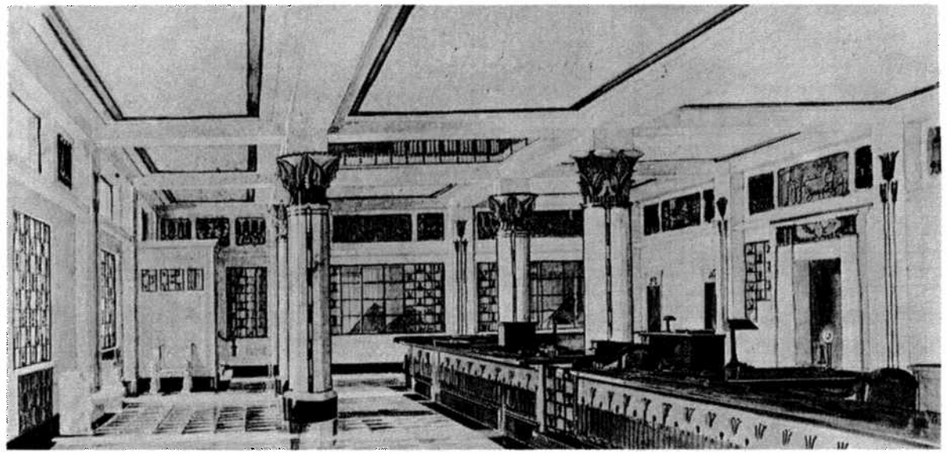
After examining the building, Ritner concluded the Reebie was based on two ancient Egyptian temples—Dendera and Edfu—erected around 200 BC by Pharaoh Ramses II. The columns facing Clark Street are replicas of the columns at the Temple of Horus at Edfu. They symbolize the unity of ancient Egypt by depicting the bundling of the lotus, representing Upper Egypt, together with the water lily, representing Lower Egypt. The distinctive relief of a woman's head, which is repeated inside the

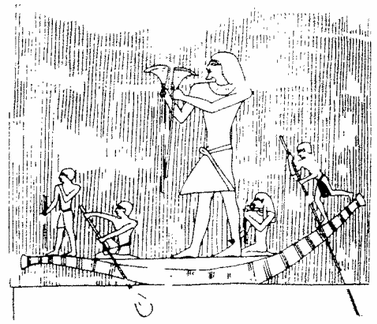
According to Egyptologists, the design of the Reebie Storage Warehouse (above) was based on two ancient Egyptian temples, erected about 200 B.C. by Pharaoh Ramses II: Dendera (below) and Edfu (bottom). The Reebie's columns (top right) are replicas of those at Edfu (bottom right).

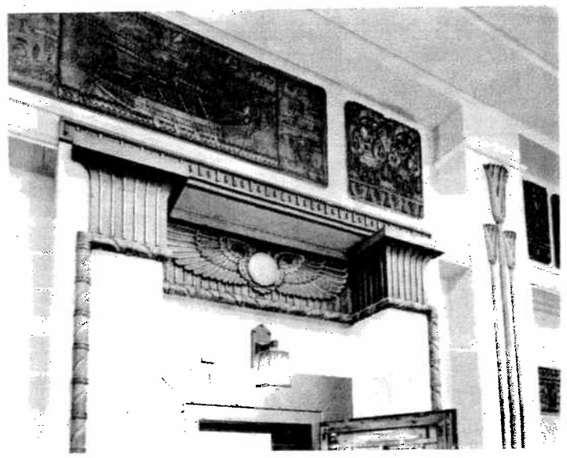




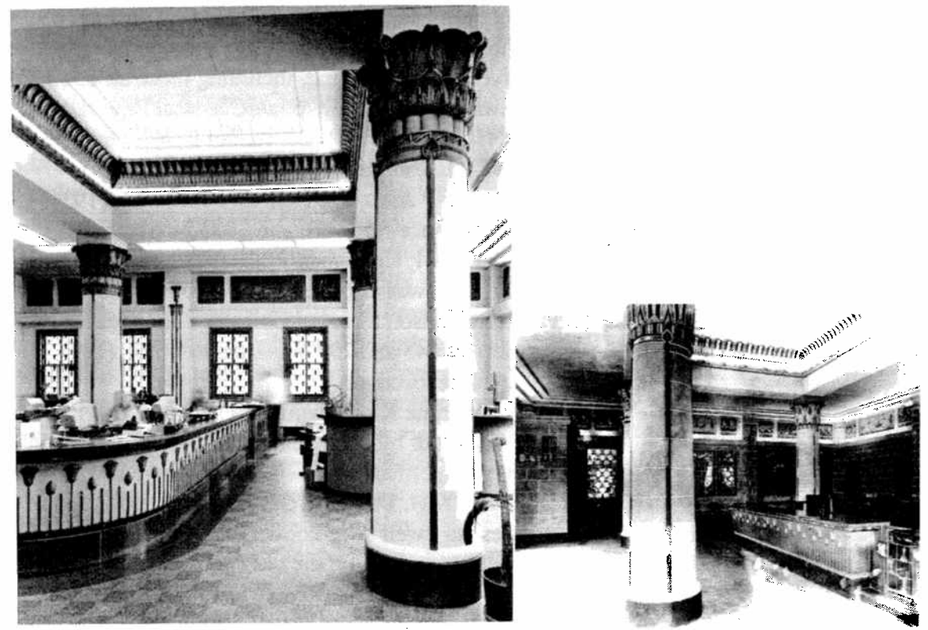








The lobby of the Reebie Storage Warehouse is little changed from its original appearance (top), including the intact art glass (above left) and plaster reliefs (right). According to Arthur Reebie, the son of the company's founder, these reliefs—including those of the ancient barges— were important to the company's image. "The Egyptians were the first moving and storage men," Reebie said. "They floated the grain down the Nile and stored it against the lean times of famine." *Middle right*: drawing of barges from 3,000-year-old tomb.



The intact lobby of the Reebie Storage Warehouse is one of the nation's finest example of an Egyptian Revival-style interior. The only change has been in the color of the wall surfaces; an original photo (right) shows a darker color with light mortar joints. The original decorative scheme made heavy use of indirect cove lighting that highlighted the plaster reliefs.

Reebie lobby, is Hathor, the Egyptian goddess representing rebirth. Her features are recognizable in images from the temple dedicated to her at Dendera.

Plaster relief details on the interior columns, walls and decorating a counter likely came from a third temple at Karnak. Of the repeat reliefs depicting a barge and a wheeled boat being pulled, Professor Ritner says, "These are copies, they are not made up. They're too good for that." He translated the inscription on one of them which says "Sailing Upper Egyptian grain." Arthur Reebie, in a 1924 interview, emphasized the importance of the barge and boat reliefs to the image of the company, saying, "The Egyptians were the first moving and storage men. They floated the grain down the Nile and stored it against the lean times of famine."

Several other George Kingsley-designed storage warehouses still survive, including (top to bottom): 6325 N. Broadway, 5951 W. Madison St., and 3833 N. Sheffield Ave.

The Architect of the Reebie Building

Architect George S. Kingsley (1870-1956) was a logical choice to design the Reebie warehouse, having built his practice designing other storage warehouses in historical styles.

Five are still standing, including those at: 6325 N. Broadway (1919-20; Egyptian/Classical Revival), 6542 N. Clark St. (1919-20; Italian Renaissance), 5951 W. Madison St. (1920-21; Classical Revival/Sullivanesque), 7613 N. Paulina St. (1921-22; Renaissance Revival), and 3833 N. Sheffield Ave. (1913-14; Craftsman/Prairie).

Kingsley was also the architect for two houses on West Hutchinson Street (a Chicago Landmark District), at 645 and 737 W. Hutchinson St. (1914 and 1911, respectively).

At one time Kingsley maintained an office in New York, but by 1922 he had closed that space and had moved permanently to Chicago where he kept an office at 109 N. Dearborn St. Kingsley and the Reebies may well have known one another before they began working on the warehouse together; Kingsley, like William Reebie and his son Arthur, lived in Winnetka.

Kingsley treated his storage warehouses as blank canvases on which he could paint an architectural character. The simplicity of the building type lent itself to ornamentation. Revival styles were very much in vogue in the early 1920s. Victorian architecture was losing favor, disliked for its fussy details and domestic connotations. In a spirit of controlled adventure, architects were turning to historical styles to refresh their design vocabularies.

No better evidence of the eclecticism of the day exists than the submissions for the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition of 1922. Many of the designs submissions were neoclassical (three were Egyptian Revival). Famed architect Louis Sullivan and others expressed their disappointment that the winner was a Gothic Revival, rather than a forward-looking, design. Writing in *Architectural Record*, Sullivan said "The first prize is demoted to the level of those works of dying ideas. . . ."

But Kingsley embraced historic styles. In his other warehouses, terra-cotta ornament was often incorporated and historic themes were suggested. Classical Greek detailing adorns one, Italian Renaissance another. Nor was Kingsley insensitive to the influential architects of the day as is evident in the Prairie-style and Sullivanesque touches he sometimes employed.

Among all Kingsley's works, however, the Reebie stands out. The imagery is never confused as it is in some of his other buildings, where neoclassical details were mixed with Egyptian or Italianate. It also was rare for Kingsley to have used the more costly custom-designed ornament like that covering the Reebie's facade. Normally he, like many other architects of the period, would have used stock terra-cotta ornament which could be ordered like yard goods from some terra-cotta manufacturers and applied to buildings. In the Reebie, the ornament is as lavish as it is thorough. The Egyptian metaphor is never dropped, nor is an opportunity missed to extend that metaphor. In all fairness, this contrast could have been a function of the budgets Kingsley was customarily given by his clients. The Reebies—particularly John—may simply have been more willing to spend than others.

"Good architecture is good advertising." Kingsley told a reporter in 1923. "Twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars added to make a building look attractive is an investment cheaper than billboard rental, more lasting, equally effective, and in better taste. People who store furniture generally live in artistic homes. They will appreciate their furs and pianos being kept in a beautiful building." Arthur Reebie sounded the same theme when he told a reporter, "Something else you have to learn about modern business psychology. Beauty attracts the eye. The Egyptian columns act as salesmen. The old-fashioned warehouses were simply a square pile of bricks or stone. People were unconsciously repulsed."

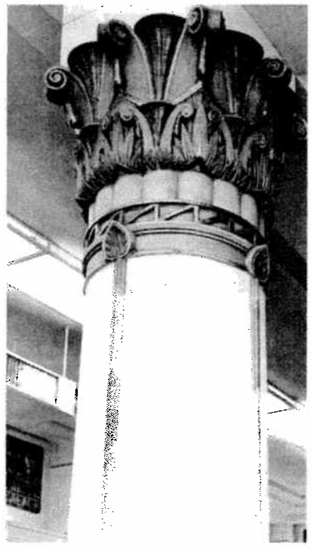
The fact is, however, that structurally and fundamentally these storage buildings were large sturdy boxes with minimal requirements. Natural lighting was not required, although a few windows were generally provided. Neither heat nor cooling was required since renters and workers were seldom in the upper stories.

"Good architecture is good advertising. Twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars added to make a building look attractive is an investment cheaper than billboard rental, more lasting, equally effective, and in better taste. People who store furniture generally live in artistic homes. They will appreciate their furs and pianos being kept in a beautiful building."

George Kingsley, 1923
Architect of the Reebie Storage Warehouse

The layout of warehouses was influenced by the objects stored in them. In the Reebie Warehouse, for example, pianos were stored on the mezzanine just behind the loading dock and adjacent to the offices, an area low in the building (for the convenience of the movers) and climate controlled (for the protection of the pianos).

In the 1920s some people also stored their cars for the winter, when streets became too difficult to negotiate. Kingsley's original scheme for the Reebie Storage Warehouse called for car storage on the top floor. However, this plan had expensive structural ramifications for the entire building and, in the end, the Reebies chose to build a garage on the adjacent parcel to the north. That next-door building was later converted to storefronts which, although far less elaborate than the Reebie, also has a stylized Egyptian motif and is clad in white terra cotta. (The date of construction of the garage is not documented, although stylistically it appears to have been built at the same time as the warehouse.)



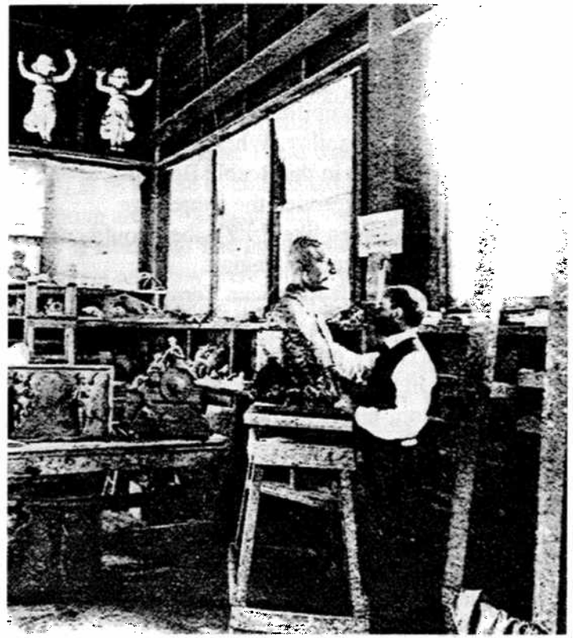
One of the column capitals in the Reebie Storage Warehouse.

The Ornament of the Reebie Building

The credit for the artistry and authenticity of the Reebie Building's Egyptian-style ornament belongs to the sculptor, Fritz Albert (1860-1940), who left generous evidence of his genius throughout a long and distinguished career.

Albert was born in the Alsace-Lorraine region of Germany which had been taken from the French during the Franco-Prussian war. While he pronounced his name as the French would—ahl-bear´—he attended art school in Berlin where he became a sculptor. Albert came to the United States to work on the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and stayed on in Chicago until the end of his life, returning to Europe only once.

After the Exposition, Albert was hired by the American Terra Cotta and Ceramic Company as the chief "modeler," or sculptor, where he worked on architectural commissions as well as designs of Teco art pottery, a famous line of ceramics that is coveted today by art collectors for its artistry of form and finish. Although the vases, pitchers, garden planters, outdoor urns and other designs were advertised in

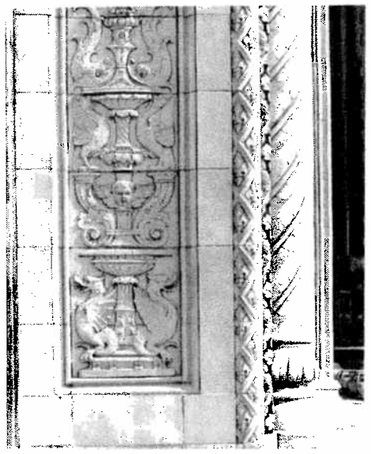


The sculptor Fritz Albert at work in his studio in 1905. Albert later became the chief modeler at the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, which produced the ornament on the Reebie Storage Warehouse.

catalogs, they were not mass produced, as one might imagine. The objects required hand finishing, often of a delicate nature that made each piece one of a kind.

Chicago was a center for terra-cotta design and manufacture from the 1870s through the 1930s. Geological good fortune and the city's central position in the nation's transportation system combined to make it so. Clay, so easily obtainable from Chicago's swampy soil, was the base material for terra cotta (in Latin terra cotta means baked earth) and trains could carry the finished product anywhere in the country. As a relatively inexpensive building material, terra cotta had three advantages over traditional masonry, such as brick and stone: it was much lighter, easily molded into shapes and ornament for decorative building facades, and it was virtually fireproof. After the Great Fire of 1871, the demand for new buildings was enormous. The Chicago Terra Cotta Company was one of the few businesses

One of Fritz Albert's most famous works is the terra cotta ornament for the Wrigley Building (1921-24).



in the city to survive the Fire and orders flooded in, making it one of the industry's most successful companies.

The sculptural possibilities of the material seemed infinite, as did its durability. When glazed, it could be easily cleaned and, as in the Reebie Building, stained in vivid colors that expanded the expressive possibilities. Craftsmen like Fritz Albert could create almost anything one could imagine.

In 1907, Albert left American Terra Cotta to become supervisor of the modeling department at Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, the largest manufacturer in the country, where a great deal of the work was custom-made. As chief modeler, Albert worked on major commissions and supervised the sculpting of the molds for all of the terra cotta pieces that were installed on thousands of buildings throughout the United States. He oversaw the terra-cotta modeling of such major Chicago buildings as the Wrigley, Civic Opera, Carbide & Carbon, and Merchandise Mart buildings.

The order for the Reebie Building terra cotta was placed in 1921. The commission required a range of products, including freestanding sculpture, a continuous frieze for the cornice, glazed brickwork, and monumental columns. The scale of the work was not unprecedented for Northwestern, nor was it inconsiderable. It plainly required artistry as well as sophisticated coordination.

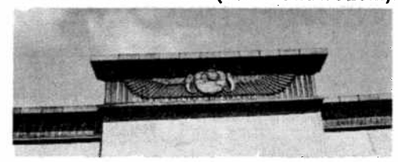
Albert brought a special talent to the Reebie commission. Timothy Samuelson, curator of architecture at the Chicago Historical Society, recently organized an exhibit on architectural terra-cotta ornament. According to Samuelson, who interviewed Albert's colleagues, Albert was a knowledgeable Egyptologist, taking interest in the academic grammar of Egyptian architecture, even down to literal transcriptions of hieroglyphics. At least two other Egyptian-inspired facades were carried out by Northwestern, and most likely by Albert: a one-story store at 4017 N. Sheridan Rd. (1920) and the Egyptian Lacquer Works (3052 W. Carroll Ave., 1926).

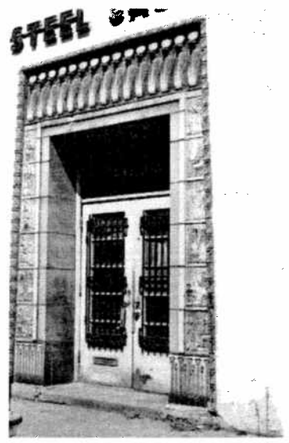
A number of books were available at the time that would have supported Albert's efforts. There was the

Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which showed ancient Egyptian decorative motifs. And there was a two-volume *Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (1920), compiled by William Budge, that would have been widely available. There were also many volumes available to enthusiasts documenting Egyptian archaeological discoveries uncovered by the likes of Breasted. The popular interest in these books was great and they were widely disseminated. Similar books were available in German which Albert could have seen or possessed as early as 1862.

Examining the base of one of the pharaohs at the entrance to the Reebie, professor Ritner saw similarities in their inscriptions to those from the *Hieroglyphic Dictionary*. The 1920 dictionary, according to Ritner, "contains some rare spelling forms that actually appear on the statue bases." Pointing to the figure of a kneeling man followed by a sign resembling an exclamation point, Ritner observes "These mean 'brother.'" By any account, great pains were taken to achieve a high level of authenticity in the Reebie Building's hieroglyphics.

Among the other Egyptian-influenced designs Albert is believed to have worked on in Chicago are: 4015 N. Sheridan Rd. (above) and the Egyptian Lacquer Works, 3052 W. Carroll Ave. (below and bottom).





The Reebie Building Today

Today, nearly all of the terra-cotta work on the Reebie remains, with the exception of its rooftop cornice. It was removed in 1971 when the top two stories were rebuilt after being damaged in a storm. Otherwise, the facade is intact. So, too, is the lobby where original details have been left in place.

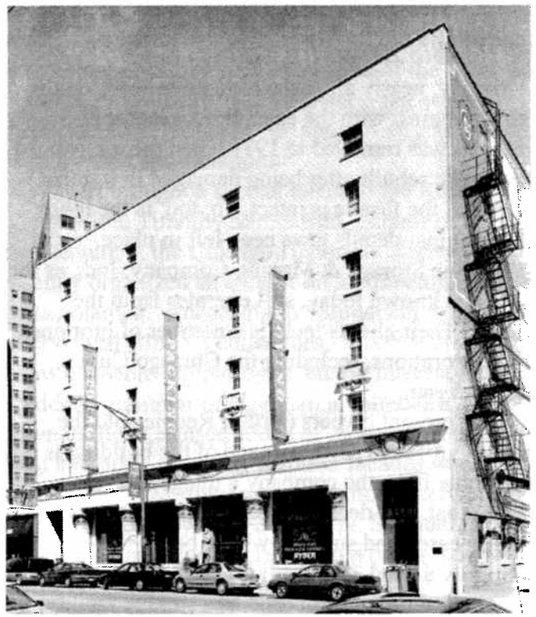
Reebie Storage & Moving Company, Inc., as the business is known today, still operates from the building. Their clients include a number of prominent local corporations, including the Chicago Cubs Baseball Team.

The present owners (Arthur Reebie sold the company in 1974) say the image of the building is inseparable from the company's image, and they treasure that. For decades Reebie's packing boxes, business cards and stationery have borne the logo of the Sphinx's head. They still do in 1998.

The building is still used as a storage facility, although innovations in the moving industry have made the suburbs more appropriate for the company's

The most common misconception is that the building's Egyptian design was inspired by the discovery of King Tut's Tomb. The design was commissioned in 1921, a year before the tomb was found.

The most significant change to the Reebie Storage Warehouse, since its completion in 1922 (above), is the reconstruction of the top two floors following a storm in 1971. This involved removal of the decorative cornice and alterations to the top floor window surrounds.

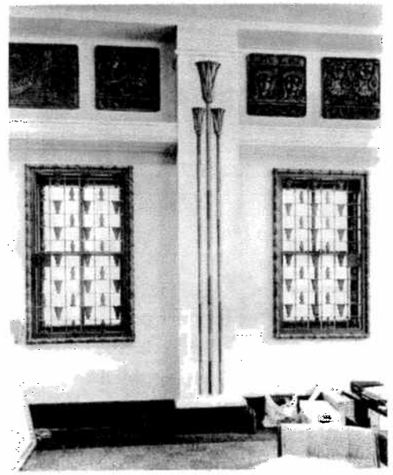


larger operational base. Although neither is used much these days, there remains in the Reebie Warehouse a special room for the large rolled Oriental carpets and a trunk room for those who were traveling for extended periods of time and wanted their valuables safely stored in the meantime. And the 70-year-old building innovations are still good too. The Reebie retains its fireproof rating from the city, thanks to the hollow ceramic tile that encases the structural frame. The mezzanine has been converted to offices and no longer holds stored pianos.

There are some good stories about the Reebie. Not all of them are true. The most common says that the building's design was inspired by the discovery of Pharaoh Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 by Howard Carter. The reality is the building and its ornament had been commissioned before the tomb was found, and the iconography is based on temples not tombs.

It is probably true that the great interest in the tomb's discovery made the Reebie all the more compelling when it was finished in 1922. It could be that John and Arthur Reebie saw an opportunity and ran with it. One early advertising slogan was: "If old King Tut were alive today he'd store his things the Reebie way."

The real stories about the Reebie Warehouse are just as good as the myths. Egypt continues to fascinate. And people who pass the Reebie will continue to remember it and wonder about it.



A detail of the lobby walls of the Reebie Storage Warehouse.

Above: This artist's rendering of William and John, in front of the Reebie Storage Warehouse, appeared on the cover of a 1980s company brochure. Below: a recent photo of the building lobby.

APPENDICES

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Chapter 21, Sec. 2-120-620 and 630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend a building or district for landmark designation if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

Based on the findings in this report, the following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Reebie Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

CRITERION 1 ***(Critical Part of the City's History)***
Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspects of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

The Reebie Storage Warehouse is an important building, emblematic of the city's changing residential character in the early 1920s. The need for storage warehouse buildings like the Reebie developed as people began to move into a new residential building type, the high-rise apartment building, and needed to store belongings which could not be accommodated in the smaller quarters of an apartment, or, needed to store things like cars and furs which required special conditions during particular seasons.

The comments of Arthur Reebie, the son of the founder of the moving and storage company, in a 1924 newspaper article underscore the impact of changing lifestyles on the storage industry:

> Originally there wasn't any furniture stored in Chicago. It was not until about twenty-five years ago that people began storing on a large scale. Then it was a matter of sheer necessity—a matter of death or [similar] circumstances. . . . Now it is chiefly a matter of convenience. They've decided to live in a hotel apartment for a time, or they're going abroad, or there's been a separation.

Given the competition for business among storage companies in 1922, when the Reebie Building was constructed, it made sense to the brothers who owned the company to design an eye-catching building that would attract customers. Certainly the Egyptian Revival-style Reebie building drew attention—and it still does today.

The Reebie Storage Warehouse is also one of the best examples of the flamboyant terra-cotta designs that graced Chicago architecture during the 1920s. Chicago was the principal city for the production of architectural terra cotta from the 1870s through the 1930s. The Reebie building is symbolic of Chicago's premier role in the production of this important building material.

CRITERION 4 ***(Important Architecture)***
Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.

Both the exterior facade and interior lobby of the Reebie Storage Warehouse make it the best example of the Academic Egyptian Revival architectural style in Chicago, and one of the premier examples in the country. In 1922, when the Reebie building was completed, revival architectural styles were in vogue. But most of these revival-style buildings were Neoclassical, Georgian or Tudor. The Academic Egyptian Revival style is distinguished from mere Egyptian Revival by its degree of authenticity.

Academic Egyptian Revival style buildings were erected in the 1920s when archaeologists were making great breakthroughs in their knowledge of ancient Egyptian architecture. Hieroglyphic dictionaries permitted amateurs to write as the ancient Egyptians would. Other books showed what genuine ornament and coloration would have looked like in the ancient Egyptian monuments. Using these resources, it was possible to construct a building—like the Reebie—which used ancient Egyptian imagery and hieroglyphics correctly and convincingly.

The Egyptian motifs which are exhibited throughout the Reebie Building include the pharaoh-like figures at the entry, the hieroglyphic inscriptions, the beetle scarabs, the sun scarabs, the concave cornice, the "lotus" columns and capitals, and inside, the relief images of boats on the Nile and the head of a goddess. The craftsmanship with which these decorative elements were created is unique and exceptionally skilled. These highly colorful terra-cotta pieces were custom-made for this building with an extraordinarily high degree of artistry. At the street level, the building presents a lively and engaging face to pedestrians and other passersby.

The Reebie building is also a distinguished example of the storage warehouse building type. George Kingsley, its architect, is credited with having improved the appearance of storage warehouses, having designed nearly a dozen in the Chicago area. A 1924 newspaper article stated:

> It was not so long ago when a furniture storage warehouse was looked upon as a nuisance and an eyesore. . . . At last, George S. Kingsley, pioneer warehouse architect, has been able to convert the big moving and storage men to the "advertising value of a beautiful building."

The Reebie Storage Warehouse is an outstanding example of this building type and of the Egyptian Revival-style of architecture.

CRITERION 7 ***(Unique Visual Feature)***
Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the city.

The Reebie Storage Warehouse is a distinctive building on North Clark Street, one of Chicago's most heavily traveled streets. With its extraordinary colored, terra-cotta, Egyptian-style ornament, it has been a visual landmark since its completion in 1922. Few pass the building without noticing it.

Relative to Chicago's storied architecture, the Reebie Storage Warehouse ranks as one of the city's best-known "unknown" buildings. Its architectural style is more whimsical than others, yet, it is this quaint character that makes it memorable. For instance, when someone mentions "that Egyptian building on Clark," virtually everyone understands the reference. It is a true landmark in the dictionary sense of the word: "As a conspicuous identifying feature of the landscape" (Webster's Dictionary).

INTEGRITY
The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The historic integrity of the Reebie Storage Warehouse is intact to an exceptional degree--in location, exterior design, setting, materials, and workmanship. With the exception of a missing cornice, which was removed following storm damage in 1971 (see photo, p. 22), the building retains its original appearance. In addition, the exterior terra cotta ornament and glazed brick appears to be in relatively good condition.

The building has been used for storage since it was built and so the interior configuration has not been substantially changed. The most important of the interiors, the lobby, still features its original design and ornamental plaster work, including relief plaques depicting boats on the Nile and a repeat image of an Egyptian goddess. Columns walls and the counter retain the original relief lily ornament. Stained and leaded glasswork separating the lobby-office from the mezzanine—and in exterior windows—is intact.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Reebie Storage Warehouse, the Commission staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features for the preservation of this building be:

- the west (Clark Street) exterior elevation, including its roofline;
- the north and south exterior elevations and their rooflines;
- the entry vestibule; and
- the first-floor lobby/office area, including the walls, ceilings, and four freestanding columns (but excluding the decorative counter and base).

Building Rehabilitation Issues

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks bases its review of all city-issued permits related to a landmark property on its adopted *Guidelines for Alterations to Historic Buildings and New Construction*, as well as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings.* The purpose of the Commission's review is to protect and enhance the landmark's significant historical and architectural features.

As noted in the report, the Reebie Storage Warehouse retains virtually all of its original features. The principal alteration on the primary (Clark Street) facade has been the reconstruction of the building's top floor following a storm in 1971. This involved the removal of the decorative cornice and alterations to the top floor's window surrounds (see photo, page 24). Future rehabilitation work that restores these missing upper-story features would be strongly encouraged, although not required.

In addition, the following rehabilitation standards are recommended:

- The architectural features on the principal (Clark Street) elevation should be retained and preserved.
- Alterations to the unfinished, secondary elevations (north and south)--such as the addition of new window openings--should be permitted, provided these changes are compatible with the overall design of the building.
- Minor rooftop additions should be permitted, provided they are set back a sufficient distance so as to not impact the design of the principal facade.
- The architectural features of the interior vestibule and ground-floor lobby/office area should be retained and preserved.
- The lobby's decorative countertop and base are excluded from this designation as a significant feature, although its retention is strongly encouraged

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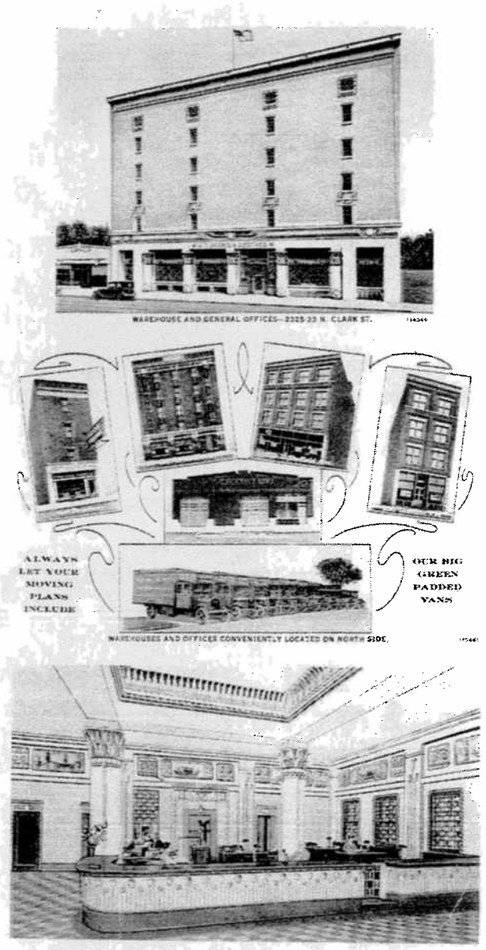
Illustrations

Bob Thall, photographer, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: front cover, pp. 2 (bot.), 12 (left and right), 13 (top), 14 (below right), 14 (above left and bot.), 15 (left), 18, 22 (bot.), 23, 24 (bot.).
Reebie Storage & Moving Co., Inc.: inside front cover, 3, 4, 5, 14 (top), 15 (right), 22 (top), 24 (top), inside back cover.
Chicago Dept. of Planning & Development: inside front cover (bot.), pp. 1, 2 (top), 20.
The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt: p. 6.
History of Architecture, Ancient Architecture: pp. 7, 13 (below left and bot. left),
A Guide to Architecture in San Francisco and Northern California: p. 9.
Identifying American Architecture: p. 10 (top).
American Architecture Since 1780: p. 10 (below and bot.).
Harold Allen, Photographer and Teacher: p. 11.
Forms and Styles Antiquity: pp. 13 (bot. right), 14 (above right).
Chicago Historic Resources Survey: pp. 16, 21.
Teco Art Pottery of the Prairie School: p. 19.
Stephen A. Beal, photographer, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: p. 20 (bot.).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This two-sided promotional postcard was produced by W.C. Reebie & Brother Company in the 1910s. The Sheffield Avenue buildings (middle left) can also be seen—as a single structure—on page 3.

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